

Shopping for Health: Yogurt¹

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Figure 1. Yogurt selection in the dairy aisle

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Yogurt has become a popular item in the American diet and has taken over the majority of the dairy section in many stores. Have you ever wondered what yogurt is, what its health benefits are, or what the differences are among the types of yogurts? Keep reading to find the answers to these questions and to learn more about yogurt.

What Is Yogurt?

Yogurt is a dairy product made by adding live, active bacterial cultures to milk to cause fermentation. Fermentation changes some of the lactose, the sugar present in milk, to lactic acid. This creates a creamy texture and tart flavor. The texture and flavor of yogurt can vary based on the bacterial culture, the straining process, or the type of milk used (whole, low-fat, or fat-free), as well as the flavoring or other ingredients added (1).

Why Is Yogurt Important for Health?

Yogurt provides many of the nutrients that the body needs for good health. These nutrients include calcium and potassium. Calcium helps maintain bone health and potassium helps with blood pressure control. Some yogurts have vitamin D added, which enhances calcium absorption and helps with immune function. The protein in yogurt helps to build and to repair muscle. Some yogurts may also aid digestive and immune function (2).

Yogurt is included in the Dairy Group of MyPlate, the USDA guide to healthy lifestyles for consumers. At

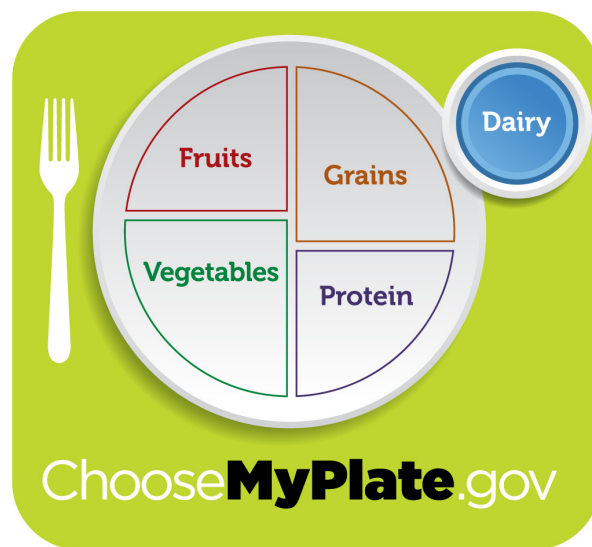


Figure 2. MyPlate Dairy Group

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ChooseMyPlate.gov, it is recommended that people over 9 years old consume 3 cups of Dairy a day. A cup is equal to 8 ounces of yogurt (4). Most yogurts come in 6-ounce containers, which is equal to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup.

Live and Active Cultures

Lactobacillus bulgaricus and *Streptococcus thermophilus* are the most common cultures used to make yogurt. All yogurts start out with live and active cultures, but some yogurts are heat-processed after fermentation is complete, which kills the bacteria. If the product contains live and active cultures, they are considered ingredients and therefore must be listed on the label (5).

The National Yogurt Association (NYA), a non-profit trade organization of the dairy industry, has created a *Live & Active Cultures* seal that approved manufacturers can voluntarily place on the packaging if their product meets the requirements outlined by the NYA. Yogurts with live and active cultures may have more health benefits. These health benefits may include reducing high blood pressure and aiding in digestive health (6).



Figure 3. Live & Active Culture seal
Credits: Trademark of the National Yogurt Association

Fat Content of Yogurt

Yogurt, like milk, is available, in whole, low-fat, and fat-free varieties. Whole-milk yogurt contains 3.25% fat, low-fat yogurt may contain between 2% and 0.5% fat, and fat-free yogurt contains less than 0.5% fat (1, 8). Table 1 lists the amounts of fat in yogurts based on whether they are made from whole, low-fat, or fat-free milk. When selecting yogurt, consider choosing a low-fat or fat-free product. Both offer all of the nutritional benefits of yogurt without the added calories from saturated fat.

Lactose Content of Yogurt

Many people lack the enzyme required to digest lactose. Because of this, they have trouble digesting foods containing lactose. This can lead to symptoms such as gas, bloating, or diarrhea. People with this problem tend to have fewer symptoms when they consume yogurt compared to milk (9). A possible reason for the decrease in symptoms may be

due to the fermentation that occurs when making yogurt. This may lower the lactose content (10, 11).

Flavored Yogurt

When reading the Nutrition Facts label for yogurt, some people are surprised to see that even plain yogurts contain sugar. The sugar content listed on the label represents the amount of sugars added for flavor plus any remaining lactose present. Lactose is the naturally occurring sugar in milk products. In plain yogurt, the sugar content will be from lactose.

Sweetened yogurts, those with sugars or sugar-substitutes added to them, come in many flavors. The most popular flavors include vanilla, strawberry, peach, and other fruit flavors. Some yogurt manufacturers have released innovative flavors such as “red velvet cake” and “apple pie.” Many fruit-flavored yogurts are also available in ‘fruit-on-the-bottom’ versions. These are often much higher in sugar than pre-mixed varieties.

Sweeteners commonly used in yogurt include fructose, evaporated cane juice, or high fructose corn syrup. These added sugars increase the caloric content of the product. “Light” varieties of flavored yogurts usually contain sugar alternatives, such as aspartame, that do not increase the calorie content.

Types of Yogurt

Traditional Yogurt

Traditional yogurt has a creamy texture and tart taste. Traditional yogurts are available in many flavors and textures. They also come in whole-milk varieties, as well as low-fat and fat-free varieties. Many supermarkets produce their own traditional yogurts that may be less expensive than name-brand versions.

Greek Yogurt

Greek yogurt is created when traditional yogurt is strained multiple times to remove some of the moisture content. The result is a concentrated, thick, and tart product with more protein per serving than traditional yogurt, but with less calcium. It also contains less lactose because some is removed with the liquid. This may make it more suitable for people with lactose intolerance (13). Table 1 compares the nutritional content of Greek yogurt to that of traditional yogurt. Like traditional yogurt, there are several manufacturers of Greek yogurt with different manufacturing processes and ingredients. These differences result in slightly different products.

Probiotic Yogurt

While some yogurts contain live and active cultures, some also contain cultures that have demonstrated health benefits beyond nutrition (14). Probiotics are live bacteria with known health benefits (6). Many manufacturers now add probiotics to their yogurts. Most probiotic yogurts are marketed as digestive aids or immune supporters. Probiotic yogurts typically have nutrient contents similar to those of traditional yogurts and come in different varieties.

Drinkable Yogurt

Drinkable yogurts offer the benefits of yogurt without the spoon. It is a great option for people on the go or for those who do not enjoy the texture of firmer yogurts. They are made by adding water and additional flavors to traditional yogurt. Drinkable yogurts offer the same nutrients as traditional yogurts, but may be higher in sugar and calories.

Organic Yogurt

Organic yogurt is produced from organic milk. An item may be considered organic only if it meets certain standards including limited or no use of most pesticides, hormones, chemical fertilizers, or antibiotics at any stage of production—for example, plants used to make the feed for animals have been grown only with a limited number of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in use, if any at all; the animals producing the milk have not been treated with hormones or antibiotics (15). Organic products tend to cost more, but they have risen in popularity with some consumers for health and environmental reasons.

Non-Dairy Yogurt

Non-dairy yogurts are a great alternative for those with milk allergies and those who experience gastrointestinal problems from consuming dairy-based yogurt products. They are also a good option for people that do not consume dairy products because of religious or personal beliefs. Yogurts made from soy milk and coconut milk can be found at health food stores and sometimes at a local grocer. These products have similar nutritional profiles to yogurts made from milk because they are fortified with nutrients such as calcium and vitamin D. While some manufacturers of non-dairy yogurts use live and active cultures for fermentation, others do not.

Kefir

There are several other fermented milk products in addition to yogurt. Kefir is an example of a non-yogurt fermented milk product. Like yogurt, kefir contains live cultures. It

is produced when “kefir grains,” which contain yeast and acid forming bacteria, are added to milk and fermentation occurs (16). This produces a slightly carbonated, fermented milk drink. The health benefits of kefir are similar to those of yogurt and include improved gastrointestinal and immune function (17).

Ways to Eat Yogurt

Yogurt can make a great snack or addition to a balanced breakfast. Try using yogurt instead of milk with cereal. You can spoon granola and fruit over your favorite kind of yogurt for a delicious treat or put yogurt in smoothies to make them creamy. Try using plain yogurt instead of mayonnaise or sour cream in recipes as a healthier and more nutritious ingredient.

Be an Informed Shopper!

You may have noticed that the yogurt section at your local grocery store is big. Walking down this aisle can be overwhelming because of the many different types of yogurts available. You may find that some yogurts meet your needs and preferences more so than others do.

Just as yogurts come in an assortment of types and flavors, the price of yogurt also varies. Since yogurt is often on sale at the grocery store, make sure you check the weekly specials. Buying yogurt in larger containers versus single-serving containers will save you money as well.

When buying yogurt, make sure you check the “sell-by” date on each package. Many grocers place items that are close to their expiration date at the front of the shelf. Yogurt has a long shelf life and many manufacturers state that their products can be consumed up to two weeks after the “sell-by” date (18). This extended shelf life is due to the live and active cultures present in yogurt (9). Remember, yogurt is a dairy product and must be refrigerated to maintain quality and safety.

Learn More About Food and Nutrition

To learn more about yogurt and other nutrition-related topics, contact the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your county Extension office. A registered dietitian (RD) also can provide you with reliable information on nutrition.

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Table 1. Nutritional Content of 6-oz Plain Flavor Traditional and Greek Yogurts

Yogurt	Calories	Fat	Carbohydrates	Protein	Calcium
Traditional					
Whole milk	120	6 g	11 g	6 g	300 mg
Low fat	100	2 g	11 g	8 g	300 mg
Fat Free	80	0 g	11 g	9 g	300 mg
Greek					
Whole Milk	270	12 g	6 g	16 g	200 mg
Low fat	150	4 g	8 g	20 g	200 mg
Fat Free	100	0 g	7 g	18 g	200 mg
** Values are averages of several brands of yogurt and USDA Nutritive Value of Foods (12), when available					